Transcript of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's interview with Russia24, 24 April 2017

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Q. Mr Stoltenberg, first of all thank you for being here and for the opportunity to ask some questions, because it’s not like it’s sunny days in relations between Russia and NATO. Let me start with the problems first, and then we go to the common issues. How would you call the conditions where we now, I mean NATO and Russia, it’s like a political tension or maybe Cold War?

A. We are not in a Cold War situation because during the Cold War it was very different, we had two military blocks, the Warsaw Pact and NATO standing against each other and with hundreds of thousands of troops, nuclear weapons in Europe and a very different situation. But we have a difficult relationship and we have seen that after the end of the Cold War tensions went down and we improved the relationship between Russia and NATO and now we have seen a deterioration in the relationship, especially after the illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia’s continued support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine. NATO does not want confrontation with Russia, NATO doesn’t want a new Cold War, we don’t want an arms race; actually we will continue to strive for a more constructive and cooperative relationship with Russia. And I know as a Norwegian politician that it is possible to have a pragmatic relationship with Russia because Norway was able to develop that with the Soviet Union and later on with Russia, so I will continue to work for a more constructive relationship between NATO and Russia.

Q. You’ve just mentioned two blocks and forces on the border. But the fact is that right now NATO tanks are now closer than ever in the NATO history to the Russian border. I’ve seen actually the map outside the studio and Crimea is Ukrainian still on your map. That is the only reason for tanks on our border or you have another one? What is the message of this?

A. No one in NATO planned or discussed or thought about the idea of deploying NATO forces to the four NATO Allied countries, the Baltic countries and to Poland before Russia annexed Crimea and before Russia started to destabilize eastern Ukraine so there’s no doubt that NATO’s presence in the eastern part of the Alliance is a direct consequence of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Because NATO Allies became afraid that something similar could happen to one of them as they saw in Ukraine. And to make sure that NATO continued to provide the necessary deterrence we have decided to increase our presence in the eastern part of the Alliance. But our presence is defensive, it’s proportionate, and it’s a measured presence. We have battalions, and I know that Russia has divisions on the other side of the

border. The three Baltic countries are independent sovereign nations, member of NATO, Poland is an independent sovereign nation. They asked us to be present there, they welcomed us, and we have responded positively with a modest defensive presence, directly triggered by the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Q. Just for understanding: tanks is going to be on the border until Russia will give or send Crimea back to Ukraine, you say?

A. We have decided that this is a necessary response to the behaviour of Russia against Ukraine, because NATO's military presence is not there to provoke a conflict but we are there to prevent a conflict. And we learned during the Cold War period that as long as NATO stands united, as long as we behave in a predictable, reasonable, defensive way, we are able to prevent a war and we did that successfully for decades during the Cold War and we are in a very different situation now but for NATO it's important to continue to send a message to all potential adversaries that NATO is there to protect all Allies and that an attack on one will trigger a response from the whole Alliance. At the same time I know that there is no conflict, no contradiction between defence and dialogue. As long as NATO is firm, defensive and predictable we can also engage in a political dialogue with Russia and I welcome very much that we have again been able to convene meetings in the NATO-Russia Council. And we have met with Russia, we have discussed difficult issues, dialogue is not always easy but that is actually what makes dialogue important because we discuss difficult issues like Ukraine, we address the importance of transparency, predictability in military relations to avoid incidents and accidents. We saw the downing of the Russian plane over Turkey in 2015, we have to avoid anything like that from happening again, and we discussed also Afghanistan and other issues. So I strongly believe in dialogue with Russia especially when the relations are difficult, as they are now, it's even more important to sit down and talk.

Q. Thank you for that, because as the situation is conflict and discussion and dialogue, and let me ask you about dialogue, about common issues. There is Afghanistan as I understand, fighting terrorism, what else can we do together to fight terror around the world and how can we fight ISIS in Afghanistan?

A. Well, first of all, I believe it's important to have a dialogue with Russia on many different issues. And one of the issues we have discussed with Russia is what we call transparency on military activities, exercises and so on because we have to avoid incidents, accidents from happening, and if they happen, to prevent them from spiralling out of control. And now we are working to get Russia on for instance air safety in the Baltic Sea, this is a Finnish initiative, and NATO Allied countries and Russia met in Helsinki some weeks ago to address that issue. NATO has suspended practical cooperation with Russia after the illegal annexation of Crimea but we continue to work for transparency, risk reduction in the military domain. We think it is important that all nations contribute to the fight against terrorism. But the challenge in Syria is of course that we see that Russia presence in Syria is not only about fighting terrorism, it's also about supporting the Assad regime. And we regard the Assad regime responsible for

atrocities, for killing of civilians, and therefore we also regret that Russia is supporting the Assad regime.

Q. Is NATO as an organisation going to be involved in the Syrian conflict or just your participants, by countries?

A. No, NATO as an Alliance doesn't have any plans to be directly involved in the conflict in Syria. We are not present in Syria. NATO Allies are, as you know, the United States, Turkey, other Allies are engaged in Syria, in the fight against ISIL or Da'esh. But NATO provides some support to the efforts of the coalition fighting ISIL, both in Iraq and Syria, we have our AWACS surveillance planes, helping improving the air picture for the coalition fighting ISIL and we do some training of Iraqi officers, but we are not present in Syria.

Q. Just let me ask you two short questions because we have no time. Would you describe me: NATO members are planning to carry out military drills involving Russian speaking figurants in Bavaria, in a few days. NATO is preparing for some action? Why do you use Russian speaking figurants in your drills?

A. Well, this is not a NATO exercise but I've been told this is a US exercise, activity.

Q. Sorry about that.

A. But I've also been informed that they asked for people with language skills, many different kinds of language skills, from different countries. So this is nothing dangerous or aggressive, this is about when they have an international activity they have people speaking many different languages as part of the activity but I think the best thing is that the US explains what this activity is because this is a US activity, not a NATO activity.

Q. OK, and the last thing, Mr Secretary, it's not completely a NATO question but I have to ask you because I have read your tweet about the tragedy of this OSCE SMM monitor in Lugansk region, you've written, let me quote: "safety and freedom of movement must be maintained". Do you or your partners have any plan on the table how to reach that goal?

A. I think it's very important to support the efforts of the OSCE in eastern Ukraine because they are so important for all attempts or all the work to find a peacefully negotiated solution to the conflict in eastern Ukraine. And the only way forward is to fully respect the cease-fire, to withdraw all heavy weapons, and to make sure that that happens, we need the international OSCE monitors and this is very serious that we now have seen that the monitors are not able to move freely around, they need full, safe, free access. To the whole region. This is the first time we have seen one of the monitors being killed. It happened in the separatists controlled part of the eastern Ukraine. And therefore I support the initiative by the OSCE to look into the case, to have an investigation and to find out exactly what happened because we have to make sure that these kind of things cannot happen again. Ukraine is a partner, is a close partner of NATO.

Q. I’ve seen Ukrainian officer here.

A, Yes, because Ukraine is a close partner and we work with Ukraine, we help them to modernize their defence and security sector, we have different trust funds, we work with Ukraine in many different ways and of course for NATO it is of great concern that we see continued violations of the cease-fire and we are also deeply concerned about the fact that one of the international observers were killed when they conducted a very important activity to inspect and observe the situation in eastern Ukraine.

Q. Thank you very much Mr General Secretary for this opportunity, thank you.

A. Thank you so much for having me, thank you.

Source: https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/events/transcripts/2017/04/24/transcript-of-nato-secretary-general-jens-stoltenbergs-interview-with-russia24-24-april-2017